

IN CHRIST ALONE: 1. What God Has Done
Colossians 1:1-14

Wangaratta, 5/10/14

I have a riddle for you to think about this morning. What becomes *less* when you *add* something to it? While you think about that, let me ask some other questions.

Can you remember when you first became a Christian? Did you know everything there is to know about our faith then, or did you learn and grow in your faith as you travelled with God on the journey? Have some things you believe now changed, from when you were a new Christian? If you have changed, what, or who, influenced you? As you've formed the body of what you now believe, have you let some things go as well as adding new things?

Lots of questions this morning as we begin a new series, based on Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Back to the riddle: What becomes *less* when you *add* something to it? I can think of a few things that fit that scenario. I love my food, but I've never really cultivated a taste for pumpkin! (Except pumpkin soup!) *Add* a piece of pumpkin to my plate, and the meal *loses* some of its appeal.

Here's another one: If I walked into the Louvre, in Paris, took out a texta and added a moustache to the Mona Lisa, it would lose something of its appeal, too, and some of its value. (And I would probably lose something, when security caught up with me!) Some things are complete in themselves. When we add something to them, we in fact spoil, or undermine, or diminish what they already have.

This is why Paul wrote to the Colossians. In fact, this is something of a recurring theme through many of Paul's letters to the churches. *You can't add to the gospel.* You don't need to add anything to the gospel. When you try to add something to what Jesus has already done, you actually diminish what he has completed. The church has always grappled with this, down through the ages. People, sometimes well-intentioned, seem to think that if the gospel is good, then the gospel plus something else will be even better.

Those "somethings else" have been many and varied. Good works have been a bit of a classic. You've made a good start. You just need to add to what Jesus has done: reading your Bible, a consistent Quiet Time, acts of service, paying your tithe regularly, fasting. Please don't hear me saying any of these things are unimportant, or shouldn't be part of a committed Christian's life and practice. They *add nothing* to what Jesus has done for us.

Now of course we want to "add" maturity to our initial commitment; Jesus expects us to grow in our faith. But there is nothing unfinished about what he did on the cross for us.

Some claim they have achieved another level in their spirituality, built on some special insight, or knowledge, or way of interpreting scripture or prophecy that is somehow not available to ordinary Christians. I'm thinking about some of the spiritual gifts; like healing and the gift of tongues. Some end times teaching carries this implication. There are the uninitiated, and there are those of us who have seen the light. Just add to your faith what I

have discovered (and am happy to show you) and you too can take your faith and your Christian experience to a whole new level.

Let's be careful we never elevate things like worship style, personal piety, or subjective experience to a place where they are seen to add something to what Jesus has completed. Wesleyans need to be careful we don't allow holiness to be treated in this way.

Reading through Paul's letter, it's hard to pin down precisely what some new to the Colossian church were trying to add to the gospel. Some of them came from a Jewish background. There seems to have been a push to add those things distinctively Jewish – like the legalism the Pharisees loved, and circumcision – as requirements of those who came to faith from a gentile background. Others wanted to add some of the prevailing culture of the times to the gospel they had received from Epaphras. Where is the harm in adding just a little of what everyone around us is thinking, believing and doing? If it makes it easier for others to accept, let's do it.

So the church at Colossae had pressure, from those urging them to observe Old Testament Jewish law and circumcise their non-Jewish converts, and pressure to add to their faith and practice customs and attitudes and maybe even worship practices from their heathen neighbours. What a minefield for those Christians back then! Remember, they had no body of Christian tradition to guide them (just thirty or so years after Jesus). They had no written New Testament, as we have. It's a minefield for us today, if we begin to accept that it's OK to add anything to what God has already done for us. And so, at the start of his letter,

I. Paul Prays for the People

in the church at Colossae. And he seeks God's blessing for them, through

A. Grace, Peace and Truth.

What a beautiful combination! Right in his opening greeting, Paul blesses his friends there, with grace and peace. He wants them to know they are where they are, because of God's grace – "unmerited favour" is the classic definition – God's goodness poured out on them without reserve, poured into them to transform their lives. God's peace ruling in their hearts and minds in times of trial and distress. Do you struggle to know how to pray for your friends in tough times (or good times for that matter)? Why not follow Paul's lead? Ask God to reveal his grace to them in greater measure; ask him to send his peace to calm their hearts and minds.

Further into our passage, and this time Paul brackets grace with truth. Again, we see real insight in this connection. Not grace that ignores the reality of our circumstances, or excuses

the part we may have played in our own difficulties; grace and truth; an open acknowledgement that this is how things are; that though things may be tough, God is here, and his grace is sufficient.

As Paul gives thanks to God for the saints at Colossae, he lists another trilogy of qualities:

B. Faith, Love and Hope.

This was a good church; these were solid, committed Christians. Epaphras had done a great job bringing the gospel to them, and guiding them in their new-found faith. There was nothing lacking; nothing more to add, to what they had already received.

Faith, love and hope, together, reflect the “full package” of new life in response to the gospel. Faith is not just an entity in itself; Paul here commends the Colossians for their “faith in Christ Jesus.” It’s the object of our faith that is all-important; and the primary focus of Paul’s letter is to tell the Colossians and us, that faith in Christ alone is all-sufficient.

Love, like faith, needs an object; and Paul gives thanks to God as Epaphras tells him the church in Colossae was known for its “love for all God’s people”. Paul has to explain to the *Corinthians* what real love looks like; he simply thanks God that the *Colossian* church knew and practised real love.

Where did this faith and love come from? They came from the hope they discovered in response to the gospel. Hope was central to their faith and their Christian experience. Hope is foundational for us, too; and it sometimes slips under the radar. Hope lives in the present, but looks to the future. And the gospel constantly reminds us that beyond this life is another one where what we see in glimpses now, and experience in part, is just a foretaste of things to come.

Is life quite tough for you at the moment? Paul tells us what he calls “our light and momentary afflictions” are preparing us for better things to come. Are things working well for you right now? You think *this* is good? Wait and see what God has in store for you! Hope is foundational for our lives as Christians. And again, it’s the object of our hope that gives it certainty. As the songwriter has said so well. “In Christ alone, our hope is found, he is our light, our strength, our song.”

Paul encourages the Colossians that he has never stopped praying for them. Commentators believe Paul had most likely never visited the church there; that Epaphras had probably started the church, and continued to serve there faithfully. Paul could support them in prayer; and as he prayed he sought for them a

C. Knowledge of God’s Will

“We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will.” What a beautiful thing to pray for anyone, particularly someone who is struggling. Don’t we all want to know God’s will; especially as it applies to the particular circumstances we may be facing? Do we sometimes become a little *too* fascinated with the task of discovering God’s will for *us*; rather than simply discovering – and pursuing – God’s will?

Paul tells them that this “knowledge of his will,” comes to them, to us, through the Holy Spirit. Let’s ask God to fill us, and those we pray for, with his Spirit, and the wisdom and understanding his Spirit brings. Then we can live lives worthy of our calling, lives that please God, and bear fruit for his kingdom, lives that are growing in our knowledge of God. Again, we note these are not things we should add to the gospel. These are the outworking of the gospel, planted and growing in fertile, co-operative hearts.

As Paul continues to tell the Colossians the things he prays for them, he notes next

D. Strength Through God’s Power.

Could you use a little more of God’s strength and power right now? Could someone you are praying for? How often do we struggle to find the strength we need to manage the complexities of life? Is God calling you to consider some form of service for him for which you feel quite inadequate? Is there something you would love to take on, but don’t feel you have the strength?

The Bible never simply urges us to “be strong!” We’re never told or expected to take on a task in our own strength. It’s, “Be strong *in the Lord!*” And Paul, in another letter, reminds us that “his incomparably great power for us who believe... is like the working of his mighty strength which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead...”¹

So, there’s my own, limited, often inadequate strength I can bring to the tasks I face; or there is the same strength God used to raise Jesus to new life, available to me. Whose strength will I choose to use?

Let me confess to not being very smart at times! How about you? Will we approach the issues we face in our natural, earthly strength; or will we summon “resurrection power” to enable us? Can we learn to be smarter? Can we follow Paul’s example as we pray, and seek God’s power for our friends?

There is so much here in Paul’s prayer, but the last point I want to include is

E. Endurance and Patience.

¹ Ephesians 1:19, 20

Does this sound a little ominous? Why does he talk about endurance and patience? Paul is a realist! He will not pretend that the Christian life is a constant succession of blessings, one after another, with none of the tough stuff! There are many blessings; many more, I'm sure, than we're aware of. But Paul describes the Christian life as a race; and we know he isn't talking about a short sprint. More like a marathon, or better still, a steeplechase!

I love the confident, positive terminology Paul uses, even as he foreshadows a life and a course with obstacles and tough times. He writes of the availability to us of "God's glorious might"; of "great endurance and patience"; of "joyful thanks" to the Father; of being "qualified to share in the inheritance of his holy people, in the kingdom of light."

This is no "grit your teeth and plough on" endurance. This is confident determination, a joyful expectation that God will guide his people forward in the strength he provides for each day's challenges. And so, as he finishes telling the Colossians how he prays for them,

II. Paul Reminds Us of What God Has Done.

Three words sum up just how complete is the work Jesus has done for us. Firstly,

A. He Has *Rescued* Us.

The lifesavers who patrol our busy beaches in summer don't drag out of the water those happily swimming around enjoying themselves! They rescue those who would otherwise drown! The word "rescue" implies helplessness, desperation. Only those unable to save themselves need rescuing.

An old gospel song we used to sing describes this need rather graphically:

Rescue the perishing; care for the dying,
Snatch them in pity from sin and the grave.
Weep o'er the erring one, lift up the fallen,
Tell them of Jesus, the mighty to save.

Where might you be today, if Jesus hadn't rescued you? Even worse, where would you spend eternity if Jesus hadn't intervened? Praise God that what you and I could never do for ourselves, Jesus did for us; he "rescued us from the dominion of darkness", and a fate too horrible to contemplate. Next, Paul tells us,

B. He Has *Forgiven* Us.

It's a horrible thing to know someone has something against you. I'm sure most of us have found ourselves in this situation at times. Far worse when we know the offence and the broken relationship that followed was all our fault; and that it is God we have offended, and who rightly holds this thing against us. The term "forgiven" speaks of our great need. You don't want to be on the wrong side of a holy, just and all-powerful God! "Forgiven" also describes our standing in God's sight now, only because of what Jesus has done for us.

Do we deserve God's forgiveness? Not because of anything we've done! We deserve his condemnation. But, praise God, "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus..."² What a relief! What a wonderful thing to know our sins forgiven.

One last term, and one of my favourites:

C. He Has *Redeemed* Us.

The word "redeemed" relates to the world of commerce, and speaks to us of value and worth. Loris and I grew potatoes through some pretty lean years. Money was quite tight for us when our children were small, and we learned to be very careful with our money; something that still influences me today.

When I walk into a shop to buy something, I'm faced with a choice. What would I rather have; the item I've come in to buy, or the money the price tag insists I'm going to have to part with in exchange for it? It's a little embarrassing to admit how often I put my money back in my wallet and walk out of the shop, empty-handed! I'd like the item, but not at that price!

God faced a choice like that when we destroyed our relationship with him. How much are you and I worth to God? Can you believe what he did for us? He had a choice to make. He could pay the price to have that relationship restored; or leave us to the consequences of our sin. The price was the death of his Son. He paid the price; he completed the transaction. I will never fully understand why. I can only conclude he values you, and me, this much. How precious we must be to the God who owns the universe!

There is nothing more to add!

² Romans 8:1